

The Builder.

No. CCC.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1848.

IN fulfilment of a promise made in the course of our recent papers on the building stone of Caen and its neighbourhood,* we proceed to notice the Aubigny quarries, which furnish a stone that is now being introduced to the English market, chiefly by the efforts of Messrs. Luard and Beedham, who have under their control the principal quarries: it bids fair to be much used. These quarries are at a place called *St. Pierre, Censier*, close to the town of

FALAISE,

which is about twenty-two miles to the south-east of Caen, and is world-famous as the birth-place of the energetic William, surnamed "the Conqueror." At Aubigny, which gives its name to the stone, and is at a short distance from Falaise, nearer to Caen, no quarries are now worked.

Falaise has several buildings of great interest, and a situation of extraordinary beauty. It owes its name to the steep rocks on which the Castle (the asserted cradle of the Conqueror) is placed (*Falaise*, a steep hill or rocky shore), and was founded by the Normans in the tenth century. The Castle is of considerable extent, and is exceedingly interesting, equally on account of its antiquity, its associations, and its striking appearance. It consists mainly of a keep, or donjon, ascribed to the tenth century, but presenting no features earlier than those of the eleventh, and a large circular tower (more than 100 feet high), built entirely of ashlar, during the occupation of the Castle by the English, between the years 1415 and 1450. It is attributed to Talbot, who then commanded the city, and bears his name.

Sixteen or seventeen years ago, the upper part of this tower was rebuilt with a soft stone, and a flat roof of bitumen was formed over it for the resort of the town's people and tourists. When we first visited Falaise, a few years ago, this portion looked new and perfect: it is now miserably decayed over the whole surface, while the lower part (400 years old), is sound and good. This affords a striking example of the folly which leads persons, for the sake of a very trifling immediate saving, by the adoption of an unsubstantial and untrustworthy material, to entail upon themselves or their successors a source of after-expense and regret. We are speaking now of failures which result from the use, with their eyes open, of a material known to be perishable. In some cases the failure is owing to the ignorance or venality of parties in whom confidence is necessarily placed, and in others to circumstances beyond the control of those interested in the duration of the structure. We are disposed to think there are few cases wherein the architect specially is much to blame.

The church of Notre Dame de Guibray, at Falaise, and that of St. Gervais, were both founded by William, and have considerable portions which may date from his time. The former, that of Guibray, has at the east end of the aisle on each side of the church, a small

semi-circular abais, and a larger one at the east end of the chancel,—an arrangement often found in early structures. The confite abais is divided, externally, into three compartments by flat buttresses, which rise from the ground to about three-fourths of the height of the building, and terminate in small columns, banded in the centre, and running up to the eaves, where the capital of each of the columns occupies the place of a corbel. The interior of the edifice has been barbarously treated.

The church of the Trinity has some very interesting and elegant additions at the chancel end, of that semi-Gothic, semi-Italian character to which we have before alluded. They have the date of their execution upon them, 1540, and were erected at the expense of a M. Herpio and his wife. The stone in which they are executed appears to be similar to that of Aubigny, and is in a good condition.

The complexity, variety, and extent of the external parts of many of the churches in the towns to which we have been referring, especially at Caen,—flying buttresses, chapels, turrets, pinnacles, and canopied niches added indiscriminately, and of all periods, ending with the rich Italian-Gothic last mentioned,—with small shops plastered against them in every available corner, produce a curious whole, not wanting in interest or picturesque effect, however unsatisfactory to a refined and correct taste.

There is a house in the town which enjoys the reputation, probably on slight grounds, of having been possessed and occupied by William. When we were first in Falaise (we had not time to seek it out on the last occasion), it was a wine shop, and presented on the front of it this amusing inscription:—

MAISON

DE

GUILLAUME

LE GRAND CONQUERANT

RICHARD.

DONNE A BOIRE ET A MANGER.*

The chief, if not the only business of the town, besides this "giving to eat and to drink," is the manufacture of cotton night-caps: nearly every house is inscribed "*Fabrique de Bonneterie*." We must no longer, however, loiter within its picturesque precincts, but descend into the quarries, and look at the

AUBIGNY STONE.

Tradition says that the quarries have been worked for a long period of time; and the appearances of the neighbourhood, the large masses of debris to be seen in various quarters, seem to justify the belief. The quarries are each approached by an inclined cutting of considerable size, the expense of forming which is great, as it descends to a depth of about 35 feet. The height, from the surface of the ground to the ceiling of the quarry we first entered, is 26 feet; and from the ceiling to the floor of the quarry, 9 feet. In this height of 9 feet there are only two beds of workable hard stone; the upper one averaging 2 feet in thickness, and the lower one 15 inches. Between these is a stratum of soft stone. The beds under are thin, about 9 inches in height, and contain shells, so that they could not be profitably worked.

The beds are nearly level, and the joints run north and south. To get out the stone the men need make no horizontal cuts, but simply have to clear away the soft beds. This produces a large amount of waste; but much of the soft stone is used in the

neighbourhood, because it is soft, not merely for manglers, steps, &c., in which shape it is prepared by the quarrymen in their more leisure time, but for the dressings of buildings. The length of the blocks is regulated to some extent by the fissures which prevail: the width of them is about 3 feet. When we were in the quarry they were removing some stones, 10 feet in length: the largest ever taken out and sent away was 17 feet long.

Strong pillars of the stone, 9 feet square, are left in the quarry 21 feet apart, to carry the ceiling, under the direction of a public inspector, as at Caen.

The Aubigny stone is probably of the same nature as Caen stone, namely, oolitic, but much more crystalline, and now shews no appearance of ore. It is very fine grained, as hard or harder than Anston stone, and the crystals are semi-transparent. It is nearly as heavy as granite, and is sawed wet, with sand. According to the statement on the spot, a man can saw about 7 feet superficial in the day, but in taking this as a datum to estimate the probable cost of labour upon it, it must be remembered, that neither the sand nor the saw used is of the best description.

The price in London is something under 2s. a foot cube. We understand it is now being used in a new church at Leeds, and in the construction of a lighthouse (in conjunction with Caen stone), at Honfleur. At the Château d'Eu, the residence of the late king of the French, it is said to have been extensively employed.

The specimens which we brought away with us will be subjected to the same series of experiments that we are now trying on the stones of different beds of the Caen quarries, and the results will be laid before our readers.

GEORGE GODWIN.

THE VERNON COLLECTION IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY.

A VISIT to the kitchen and scullery of the National Gallery, where the Vernon collection of pictures has been stowed away ("taken in and done for" literally), has given us more pain than we can easily express.* None of the pictures can be seen well; the greater number of them cannot be seen at all. In many cases every crack in the varnish, every roughness on the surface, and every defect in manipulation are discoverable, without the possibility of seeing the real merits of the picture, or its general scope. Many are on the floor, others are close to the ceiling; some are in corners where no ray of the sun ever penetrates, and those which have escaped this fate are hung between two warring lights which utterly confound and destroy them. If the most effectual mode of placing the modern school of British painters (as well as their pictures) in a false light for the advantage of the rest of Europe has been sought, the result must be deemed satisfactory.

It surprises us to find our contemporary of the *Art-Journal*, who has so much interest in having this collection thought well of by the public, speaking with complacency of the present aspect of the pictures, and asserting that "generally they are better seen than they were in Mr. Vernon's house." It must be that our excellent contemporary is so thoroughly possessed of their merits by long contemplation of them in connection with the series of engravings from them he is about to issue, that (like an old married couple) he sees them in his mind's eye as they were, and not as they are. The collection was not properly seen in Mr. Vernon's house, but here it is wholly disfigured and sacrificed, and is made to lower the world's opinion of our modern school of art, instead of greatly raising it, as

* "Great Caesar died, and turned to clay,
May stop a hole to keep the wind away."

* The *Man-in-the-Moon* suggests that, placed as the collection now is in a cellar, instead of Vernon Gallery, the Vernon Pit would be the more appropriate designation.